

Tantrums and meltdowns, the differences and strategies that might be considered to reduce them.

(Transcribed from the Beacon School Support podcast)

Tantrums:

Tantrums and meltdowns have different root causes.

A tantrum is a controlled behaviour exhibited by a child who is not happy about getting their own way. The behaviour becomes evident as the child starts to gain a sense of independence in the world. We sometimes call this stage of development The Terrible Twos.

It's when the child feels that they are being denied, not getting their own way, or being thwarted. It's a chosen behaviour with an element of control. It is not driven purely by emotion. You will notice that every now and then, the child will pause and check for your reaction.

Strategies that may help to reduce the likelihood of a tantrum include:

- Reminders of expectations
- Boundaries
- Talking through consequences of continuing with the behaviour
- Consistency in your approach

Meltdowns:

A meltdown is something else. It is defined as:

'An intense response to an overwhelming situation to the extent that the individual loses control of their behaviour'.

As a result, you might observe screaming, yelling, crying, punching, hitting out or running away.

The fuel that powers a meltdown isn't frustration at not having your own way, it is anxiety- that crushing, inescapable sensation that overwhelms the brain and pushes us into survival mode (fight/flight/freeze) when we find ourselves in a situation that exceeds our current capacity to cope.

We all have three basic forms of thinking and behaviour.

1. The first lives in our pre-frontal cortex. This is the part of the brain that deals with language, logical thinking, and executive planning. When we are calm, this is the part of the brain that deals with self-control.
2. The second is automatic behaviour. These are the habits that we have picked up over the years and we can engage in these behaviours on autopilot without seeming to think before doing them. For example- driving a car.
3. The third is emotional behaviour. This lives in the amygdala. It's our 'caveman brain'. This part of the brain is very strong and powerful, and it drives us into action to help us to 'survive and thrive'. When we feel stressed and overwhelmed to the extent that we cannot cope, our brain shifts into this mode. It turns off the pre-frontal cortex the more we move into fight/flight or freeze, and we then become driven by our pure emotions.

Meltdowns are not about choice; they are about emotion. Therefore, how you approach a child who is in a heightened state of emotional distress needs to be different from that of a child who is having a tantrum. They are distressed so our actions should focus on empathy and emotional support.

Using de-escalation techniques will prove to be more productive. This includes:

- Reducing situations that might be perceived as threatening.
- Co-regulating with the child by remaining calm and using clear and concise language.
- Helping them to get on top of their anxiety by acknowledging and validating how they are feeling.

Prevention is better than cure. Finding out what is most likely to trigger anxiety in the first place so that you can work together to find solutions.

Three common causes include:

1. **Sensory needs not being addressed** can increase anxiety throughout a long day at school. It can drain the brain's capacity to self-regulate. A few small adjustments to the environment could make a big difference.
2. **Transition and change:** for many autistic students any form of change or transition can stoke their anxiety levels. This might include a transition from moving from one activity to another, moving from location to location or adult to adult. Strategies that help the student to gain a sense of certainty will be really helpful. This might include: visual timetables; now and then boards; having time to plan and prepare so that they know what to expect, when.
3. **Social environments** can be perceived as threatening and overwhelming: these can be busy, noisy and unpredictable, full of other people that they might struggle to understand, worrying about making social mistakes or misunderstanding interactions. Strategies that encourage the young person to experiment with times when they are working in groups and times when they can be on their own in a quiet environment will provide them with a structured environment where they can succeed. The quiet times will provide opportunities to decompress before they participate in some form of social learning again.

These ideas are forms of co-regulation which helps to reduce the likelihood that the young person will become dysregulated and experience a meltdown.

This is not a definitive list of triggers and strategies. It is important that every child is an individual and what might work for one may not work for another. Therefore, don't make assumptions but it is hoped that by taking pre-emptive action to provide containment and consistency, the young person's emotional resilience will increase over time.

References:

- <https://parentingsmart.place2be.org.uk/article/my-child-has-meltdowns>